

Great Answers to Tough Interview Questions

The number one way to ace an interview is to know yourself! Always complete your research before an interview: know the kinds of things you are good at, the kind of things that you may need to work on, the kinds of experiences you've had in the past, what kind of boss you'd like to work for, what kind of company you'd like to work for, etc.

Questions that revolve around potential negatives are always the toughest to answer. Prepare for them by thinking about answers ahead of time. Type up answers or write them out, and review them before going into the interview. It is like studying concise, and then stopping and seeing if the interviewer wants to pursue it further.

The following questions have been identified as some of the toughest in the interviewing business. These are the ones you need to prepare for ahead of time!

1. Tell me about yourself.

Probably the easiest difficult question you will face! It is easy to talk about you, but what does the employer really want to know? Try talking about personal characteristics and skills that translate into career strengths. Develop a one-minute commercial for yourself. In one minute, tell someone from your high school days upward why you chose the college you did; what you did in college and why you made the decision to go into your particular field.

Typically the interviewer is looking for an overview of your related experience. Provide an answer that shows a logical progression throughout your educational/professional career. If your educational background led you in a certain direction, include that in the overview. While this may be seen as an easy question for some, quite a few solid candidates blundered on this simple question. We are not used to selling our abilities and competencies like a product. For those who have given it some thought, this is the right opportunity to talk about your strengths such as your enthusiasm, leadership, self-confidence and reliability, with a few real-life anecdotes thrown in to support your points.

EXAMPLE: "I love to jump into projects with both feet. I can concentrate on solving a tech problem for hours, although I know to effectively use my time I need to consult my colleagues for their expertise, and often convene brief project team meetings bounce around a solution, plotting it out, and preparing a presentation for my boss. Object-oriented technology [or any other skill] is my newest challenge."

EXAMPLE: "My background to date has been centered on planning myself to become the very best _____ I can become. Let me tell you specifically how I've prepared myself..."

2. What are your greatest strengths?

You certainly have many positive qualities, but since you can only choose a few, be careful as your answer will also reflect your values. Some might say honesty, other reliability or a strong sense of leadership, but whatever it might be, be ready to make reference to a situation where you have demonstrated such strength. Examples help solidify and support your strengths.

3. What is your greatest weakness?

Admit that you have a weakness, and that you are successfully using a strategy to improve this weak are you have realized in your professional array of skills and experience. This technique turns the weakness into a strength by demonstrating your commitment to self-improvement.

EXAMPLE: "I would say that my greatest weakness has been a lack of proper planning in the past. I would over-commit myself with too many variant tasks, then not be able to fully accomplish each as I would like. However, since I've come to recognize that weakness, I've taken steps to correct it. For example, I now carry my palm pilot at all times so that I can effectively plan my appointments and "to do list" items."

4. What were your favorite subjects in school and why?

Of course, if your major is Computer Science, you want to mention some of your computer science classes. You can mention other related subjects as well. For example, if you're interviewing at a financial services firm, you might discuss why you liked your accounting or finance classes. If you did any usual or special projects in that area bring it up now. Mention anything that shows keen interests in this employer's particular kind of work.

5. Why change jobs now?

Interviewers want to know your reasons for leaving a particular position/employer. It is important to stay positive about your past experiences. Nobody wants to hire a person that complains about past employers—they figure you may complain about them in the future. Talk about why it was time to move on, that you learned a lot, you are seeking new and more challenging opportunities, etc.

6. What makes you stand out when compared with your peers?

Employers want to know that they are considering someone who will go above and beyond the call of duty. It is easy to hire a person that will do that they are asked to do between nine and five. However, it is better to hire a person that meets all the basic expectations and more. Provide examples of projects which you excelled with, ideas that helped streamline operations, or new sales/marketing techniques that increased revenues. If you put some thought into it, there are probably several things you have accomplished in the past that makes you stand out.

7. What type of management / supervision do you prefer?

This question can come in many forms, but the meaning is always the same: are you able to be managed by people with different styles? You probably have reported to managers with vastly different approaches to management and supervision, and have learned which styles you prefer. Since you probably do not know the manager's style at the prospective employer, talk about the positive aspects of each style you've encountered.

8. What do you like about your current position? What would you add to make it more challenging?

Interviewers are looking for people that have some relevant experience for the position offered. This question allows you to pick the responsibilities that you enjoyed that are also included in the available position. (I like the people is NOT an acceptable answer, unless you are taking them with you!) The second part of this question focuses on what you want to learn in your next job. If it were available in your present/last position, you would still be there. Think about what this position offers and what you can contribute. This should match well with that you want to learn/do.

9. Where do you see yourself in (X) years?

This may be the toughest question of them all! If you only had a crystal ball! Basically, however, Interviewers are doing a reality check here. They want to see if you are realistic about your career goals and the steps you will need to take to attain them. The best answers start in the present and work forward. Talk about your next move and what you hope to accomplish over the next year or two. Then take that one or two more steps. Most importantly, keep your dreams within the realm of reality.

10. Why should we hire you for this position?

This question is as straightforward as they come. If you've prepared for the interview ahead of time, this one should be easy. Your answer should focus on your experience, accomplishments, why you are different than your peers, and your work ethic, as they pertain to the specific job description. If you handled the interview well up to this point, you are just tying it all together.

11. What books/magazines do you read?

Obviously, a technical or trade journal is one answer they are looking for. The books you've read tell the manager something about you personality. Whatever you do, don't say, "I don't like to read."

12. What interests you most about this position?

Your education, training and experience as well as your accomplishments should provide good references for answering that question. Do not hesitate to stress the fact that this would represent a dynamic move, while giving you the opportunity to grow, to increase your responsibilities and knowledge of the field, and may possibly help you define and reach new goals.

13. Do you work well under pressure?

Of course everyone will say yes, but it is more convincing if you could provide examples of situations when you have remained cool under fire. Be careful not to choose a situation of crisis for which you were the one responsible!

14. If you could change one thing about your personality, what would it be, and why?

Make the answer to this question positive by referencing your attitude and determination. Comments such as “I am sometimes impatient with slow performers” or “Being very demanding of myself” or “Sometimes I expect too much from others” are good. Keep in mind that most interviewers will use the information you give them to raise even more incisive questions.

15. How has your education prepared you for your career?

EXAMPLE: “As you will note on my resume, I’ve taken not only the required core classes in the _____ field, I’ve also gone above and beyond. I’ve taken every class the college has to offer in the field and also completed an independent study project specifically in this area. But it’s not just taking the classes to gain academic knowledge-I’ve taken each class both inside and outside of my major, with this profession in mind. So when we’re studying _____ in _____, I’ve viewed it from the perspective of _____. In addition, I’ve always tried to keep practical view of how the information would apply to my job. Not just theory, but how it would actually apply. My capstone course project in my final semester involved developing a real-world model of _____, which is very similar to what might be used within your company. Let me tell you about it...”

16. Are you a team player?

EXAMPLE: “Very much so. In fact, I’ve had opportunities in both athletics and academics to develop my skills as a team player. I was involved in _____ at the intramural level, including leading my team in assists during the past year-I always try to help others achieve their best. In academics, I’ve worked on several team projects, serving as both a member and a team leader. I’ve seen the value of working together as a team to achieve a higher goal than any one of us could have achieved individually. As an example...”

17. Have you ever had a conflict with a boss or professor? How was it resolved?

EXAMPLE: “Yes, I have had conflicts in the past. Never major ones, but certainly there have been situations where there was a disagreement that needed to be resolved. I’ve found that when conflict occurs, it’s because of a failure to see both sides of a situation. Therefore, I ask the other person to give me their perspective and at the same time ask that they allow me to fully explain my perspective. At that point, I would work with the person to find out if a compromise could be reached. If not, I would submit their decision because they are my superior. In the end, you have to be willing to submit yourself to the directives of your superior, whether you’re in full agreement or not. An example of this was when...”

18. If I asked your professors to describe you, what would they say?

EXAMPLE: “I believe they would say I am very energetic person, that I put my mind to the task at hand and see to it that it’s accomplished. They would say that if they ever had something that to be done, I was the person who they could always depend on to see that it was accomplished. They would say that I always took a keen interest in the subjects that I was studying and always sought ways to apply the knowledge in real world settings. Am I just guessing that they would say these things? No, in fact, I am quite certain they would say those things because I have them with me in several letters of recommendation from my professors, and those are their very words.”

19. What qualities do you feel a successful manager should have?

EXAMPLE: “The key quality should be leadership - the ability to be the visionary for the people who are working under them; the person who can set the course and direction for subordinates. A manager should also be a positive role model for others to follow. The highest calling of a true leader is inspiring others to reach the highest of their abilities. I’d like to tell you about a person who I consider to be a true leader...”

20. If you had to live your life over again, what would you change?

EXAMPLE: “That’s a good question. I realize that it can be very easy to look back and wish that things had been different in the past. But I also realize that things in the past cannot be changed, that only things in the future can be changed. That’s why I continually strive to improve myself everyday and that is why I am working hard to become the very best ___ your company has ever had-to make a positive change. So in answer to your question, there isn’t anything in my past that I would change. I look to the future to make changes in my life.”

21. Why were you fired from your last job?

If you were fired wrongfully, say it matter-of-factly. Do not show a grudge against your old employer. If you were fired because something that was your fault, say it in a less damaging way.

EXAMPLE: "I cut prices on our product to make a customer happy without asking my superior. The company lost money and I was fired because of that. I agree it was my fault-I should have asked my superior. I have learned my lesson and it will never happen again."

22. It's been 6 years since you started your bachelor's degree, why aren't you finished?

Be as positive as possible and explain your reasons calmly and logically. Never answer the following: you are having too much fun and did not have time, you do not think a degree is important, etc.

23. If you join our company, and another company offers you more money, will you leave? Or, how long will you stay with us?

If you say yes, you will probably not get the job. If you want, you can tell them that the salary will make you happy and keep you with this company. For example, you might say something like, "If I accept the job, then that means that I also accept the salary and I do not think I will leave." Concerning your length of employment longer is better. You may want to discuss that you want to stay at your next job as long as the relationship is mutually beneficial.

24. What are the things in a job that make you more productive? Less productive?

Remember, no work environment is 100% perfect. You can't please all of the people all of the time. However, we adapt and make the best of what we have. So make your answer practical.

25. Why have you been unemployed for the last two years?

You must have a sound reason for not working so long or having a big gap in your work history. Some examples of good reason would be: Caring for a sick family member; Raising children; Looking for the right job where you can really contribute (this will not work if the period of unemployment was an extremely long time); Trying out self-employment or owning your own business; Returning to school for further training; Learning new skills; Exploring or traveling (for a short gap only).

26. At your last job, you worked at the same position for five years without a promotion. Why?

Avoid saying anything negative. Tell the truth in a positive way.

EXAMPLE: "There was not much growth in our department. None of the people working in my department had been promoted. This is one of the reasons I am looking for a new employment opportunity."

27. What salary are you looking for? Or, what kind of salary do you think you are worth?

Don't be too specific – a range is often most comfortable for everyone to work with. Even better, ask if the company has a salary scale and base your answer on that. Remember, salary is related to market value. Research your worth before you get into the interview. Also, interviews are not ignorant. Research your market value and give a range

EXAMPLE: "I checked a few sites on the internet and found that the average salary for a web designer ranges from 45K to 60K per year in this geographic area, depending on the responsibilities and duties involved. I am not set on a specific number and am willing to negotiate."

28. How many players are there in a soccer game?

This type of question has nothing to do with your career. Right or wrong answers do not matter. Interviewers want to see if you can manage with non-related subjects, and think on your feet. They might be testing your ability to reason, problem solve, and utilize resources.

EXAMPLE: "I am not sure but my guess would be at least two players on each side, one in the goal and one to play defense. I will put the number between seven and twelve on each team. I would definitely want to consult a colleague of mine who plays soccer if this was a game show right now – using phone a friend is important sometimes in utilizing available resources."

29. Do you have any questions?

If you have done your homework, you'll have several questions to ask about the position, company, or industry. Having questions already prepared makes you appear motivated to excel in the interview, and generally organized and put-together. If all else fails, ask the interviewer if they need any further clarification about your qualifications.